



The Blood Countess Elizabeth Báthory de Ecséd

Countess Elizabeth Báthory de Ecséd (Hungarian: Báthory Erzsébet, Slovak: Alžbeta Bátoriová ; 7 August 1560 – 21 August 1614) was a Hungarian noblewoman and alleged serial killer - a victim of a political conspiracy. She was from the Báthory family of nobility in the Kingdom of Hungary and cousin of the Hungarian noble **Stefan Báthory**, King of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Duke of Transylvania. She has been labeled by **Guinness World Records** as the most prolific female murderer, though the precise number of her alleged victims is debated. She is commonly known as “**The Blood Countess.**”

At the age of 15, Erzsébet was married to **Ferenc Nádasdy** (age 20) in what was likely a political arrangement within the circles of the aristocracy - they were wed in a lavish ceremony attended by over 4500 guests, including most of the then royalty of central Europe. Nádasdy's wedding gift to Báthory was his home, **Csejte Castle**, Upper Hungary (*now in Slovakia*).

However, only three years after their marriage, Nádasdy became the chief commander of Hungarian troops, leading them to **war against the Ottomans**. Erzsébet's husband, Ferenc, entrusted his wife to **György Thurzó**, the Palatine of Hungary, who would eventually lead the investigation into Erzsébet's alleged crimes. In 1601, 27 years into their marriage, Ferenc came down with a debilitating disease and lost the use of his legs reportedly due to an unknown illness or a battle wound. Not long after Ferenc became ill, bizarre rumors started being spread about Erzsébet and her lands. A Lutheran minister with no known connection to the similarly Protestant Erzsébet began denouncing her from town to town as a villainess, filing reports with every secular and ecclesiastical courts that would hear him. But, three years later, in 1604, Ferenc (age 48) died, leaving Erzsébet and his affairs in the case of the Palatine of Hungary, György Thurzó. And that's when all the trouble started.

During the war, Erzsébet had been left to run the Nádasdy estate, including management of its defence, business affairs, and upkeep, which would have been no easy task. Records indicate she took rather good care of their land and people. She was apparently a decent novice physician, and there are several known instances where she stood up for local women's rights: she lead an etiquette school for other aristocratic ladies, provided a haven for destitute war widows and once even intervened in a rape case reputedly much like her very own childhood incident. It was only after Ferenc's death that Erzsébet was said to have gone on a brutal killing spree during these years.

After rumours of Báthory's atrocities had spread through the kingdom, Thurzó ordered two notaries to collect evidence in March 1610, which supposedly included testimony from more than 300 witnesses (records actually show thirteen witnesses) among the nobility, priests, and commoners. Báthory and four collaborators were accused of torturing and killing hundreds of young women between 1585-and-1609. It was said she eventually ran low of girls to satiate her habit and she began to lure victims of higher born families, who began to notice their missing daughters. Thurzó's investigation happened over the course of a single winter in 1610 (which, given that everyone was moving round on horseback is a teensy bit implausible that it was fair or just). They arrested Erzsébet and her four closest servants on December 30th of that year.

Legend has it that Thurzó caught her red-handed while she was bathing in the blood of the young maidens she'd just been torturing. But, actually, they quietly arrested Erzsébet and her friends, and then the next day they happened to find one dead girl, one sick, dying girl, and one woman tied up among the war prisoners kept at Erzsébet's castle. This was the physical evidence behind the claim of a presence of horribly mutilated dead, dying and imprisoned girls found at the time of her arrest. Survivors, all claimed [under fear of torture] *that* they had encountered Erzsébet and her servants kidnapping and torturing young girls - including the daughters of the less wealthy aristocracy who were attending her etiquette academy. Even the staff at her in-laws castle claimed they had witnessed Erzsébet murdering innocents. Many claimed that they had lost relatives to her. And some of the earlier witnesses even maintained that

they themselves were responsible for selling people to Erzsébet for her torturous entertainments. The one servant that refused to condemn Erzsébet was tortured in front of the others (by having her breasts and eyes removed). The highest number of victims cited during Báthory's trial was 650. However, this number comes from the claim by a serving girl named Susannah that **Jakab Szilvássy**, Countess Báthory's court official, had seen the figure in one of Báthory's private books. The book was never revealed, and Szilvássy never mentioned it in his testimony.

The accusations made against her by Thurzó were part of a pre-planned attempt to frame Erzsébet, a bothersome political rival, for crimes she did not commit and imprison her. Thurzó had been assisting **Holy Roman Emperor Matthias II** in his efforts to extend his control over powerful Hungarian nobles and the Bathory family certainly fell into his category. It has also been said that there is evidence that Thurzó was after Báthory's significant wealth. Secondly, King Matthias and the Imperial Family owed substantial amounts of money to the Countess, which they had trouble paying due to the lack of cash flow in their coffers, and this may have provided motive to have her eliminated. In addition, being a widow in charge of a large estate, Bathory could have been susceptible to rumours that she was involved in witchcraft. Scapegoating widows and accusing them for being responsible for natural deaths was common in Central Europe during this era.

Matthias II was all for executing everybody and then claiming all of Erzsébet's land for his own, especially since he owed her and Ferenc money from the war. But Thurzó made a deal with Erzsébet's oldest son, instead. Erzsébet would be put under house arrest and only her servants tried for her crimes. And the son, Paul would therefore acquire all of her assets (obviously some of which he'd give to Thurzó, along with forgiving Matthias' debts).

Thus, despite the evidence against Erzsébet, her family's influence kept her from facing trial. In December 1610, Thurzó went to Csejte Castle and arrested Báthory. But he was faced with a dilemma - a trial and execution would have caused a public scandal and disgraced a noble and influential family, and Erzsébet's considerable property would have been seized by the crown. Thurzó successfully convinced **King Matthias** that bringing Erzsébet to trial would negatively affect the nobility, so the trial was abandoned and, *instead*, Báthory was imprisoned in **Čachtice Castle**.

Erzsébet's four servants: **Katarína Benická**, **Ilona Jó**, **Dorotya Semtész**, and **János Újváry** (known as **Fickó**), all suffered ghastly public deaths. The women's fingers were pulled off with pincers before they were burned at the stake... and Fickó was beheaded. She, herself, was kept bricked up in solitary confinement within a windowless room, with only small slits left open for ventilation and the passing of food, where she remained imprisoned until she died in her sleep five years later, on 24 August 1614. The locals refused to have her buried nearby, and so her remains were interred in the Bathory family tomb farther south in her home region of Ecséd.

The rumors of such a dark countess stuck a chord with all levels of society: the aristocrats she lived amongst, the peasants she reputedly tortured, and the priests she was taunting by purportedly practicing satanic dark arts. Men used the tale of her supposed abuse of local power was used as a morality tale of what happened when women were put in charge. And her legend spread and grew even more evil with each version of the tale told round the campfire until finally she was the personification of evil and the ultimate serial killer. Stories which ascribe to her vampire-like tendencies (most famously the tale that she bathed in the blood of virgins to retain her youth) were generally recorded years after her death and are considered unreliable.

Rumor has it that there's a stash of Erzsébet's letters in a locked archive in Budapest that haven't been properly added into her history. But then again, most people prefer the story about a sadistic woman who bathed in bathtubs full of blood - why would they actually want to hear the real story of a woman who was the victim of political injustice?